

Mr. DOBBS'S

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SPEECH

IN THE

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OF

IRELAND,

ON TUESDAY THE 5th, OF MARCH, 1799,

ON SUBMITTING

FIVE PROPOSITIONS

FOR

TRANQUILLIZING THE COUNTRY.

—DUBLIN:—

PRINTED BY J. MOORE, 45, COLLEGE GREEN.

1799

MR. DOBBS

STEPHEN

IN THE

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OF

ARLETON

ON TUESDAY THE 26th OF MARCH, 1793

46

ON REMITTING

875

FIVE PROPOSITIONS

FOR

TRANQUILLIZING THE COUNTRY.



PRINTED BY J. MORTON, COLLEGE GREEN.

1793

S P E E C H, &c.

S I R,

WHEN I gave notice of the business of this day, I declared I would fully unbosom myself to this house, and I am come prepared to keep my word. The situation of Ireland calls aloud on every honest man to explicitly avow his sentiments; the heart that feels not for our past calamities, and that is not anxious to avert those that are impending, deserves to be silent; and the tongue that dares pronounce what is contrary to the conviction of the mind, ought to be silenced for ever. With these feelings—with these sensations—I have this day entered these walls; and I trust I have left every passion, every prejudice, and every selfish idea behind me.

Sir, I have before declared, that I would move nothing that I conceived inimical to British connexion—to our present form of government—or to the safety of the Protestants of Ireland. British connexion has ever been dear to me for a variety of reasons. It is dear to me because I am sprung from British ancestors; it is dear to me from a similarity of language, laws, and manners; it is dear to me because the mutual interests of both require it should exist; it is dear to me because the British nation stands among the first that have ever appeared in the world. Nothing can make me wish to break off the connexion but British

A 2 tyranny;

tyranny; let Great Britain and Ireland be forever connected, but not at the expence of Irish independence. Sir, I love the constitution of King, Lords and Commons as fixed under William the 3d. at the glorious revolution of 1688: because for a century from that æra, England enjoyed more happiness and prosperity, than any other nation ancient or modern. I do not prefer that constitution from prejudice, but from reasoning; and as far as I have been able to find from the page of history, it seems to me to be the best result of human wisdom, and its operation the happiest in all political practice. Great abuses have indeed crept in, but I would not for that reason overthrow the constitution, tho' I would do those abuses away. Sir, I am attached to the Protestants, because I am descended from Protestants—because every near relative I have are Protestants—but I am not only attached to the Protestant, but also to the Catholic, and every sect of christianity. And now, Sir, that christianity is attacked on all sides by infidelity, it behoves every man who is a christian, no matter of what denomination, to rally round the standard of the Messiah. This, Sir, is necessary to defeat the propagation of French principles, which threaten to reduce Europe again to the miserable system of Pagan and Heathen philosophy, which threaten to reduce Europe again to those miserable doubts, which the wisest men of antiquity felt as to future rewards and punishments, and as to the immortality of the soul. Cato, the best and wisest of the Romans, could only say “Plato thou reasonest well,” but with the christian it is not reasoning, but certainty. He has a fixed and steady principle of life and action, the most conducive to individual and general happiness; therefore whilst we attend to the Protestants, let us also embrace our Catholic brethren, and unite us all in christian love and benevolence. I have thus explicitly given

given my reasons for loving the British connexion—the present form of government, and why I will never endanger the Protestants; but how are we to preserve this British connexion—how are we to preserve the constitution—and how are we to secure the Protestants? I will tell you Sir; it is by wise and wholesome laws, that will make the great mass of the People love and respect their government; this is the way to tranquillize Ireland, and this is yet within our power. This will do more to restore Ireland to peace and happiness than one hundred martial laws, and one hundred thousand executions; till such salutary measures are adopted, I, for one, must consider Ireland as a vast slaughter-house, in which 40,000 men of different descriptions, already lie dead, and in which some hundred thousands are devoted to future immolation. I shall perhaps be told of the deep criminality of most of those who are gone, and of most of those who are yet doomed to perish. Sir, I stand not here the advocate of Rebellion, or of guilt; but I beseech the members of this House to take care that they themselves are innocent. If the discontents and rebellion have arisen from an unwise or wicked system of Government, I do not hesitate to say, that all the property that has been destroyed, whether of the Rebel or the Loyalist, lies at the door of the Legislature. If an unwise and wicked system of Government has prevailed, I do not hesitate to say, that every drop of blood that has been shed, whether of the Rebel, or the Loyalist, lies at the door of the Legislature. Now, Sir, can any man doubt, whether this country has been governed unwisely or wickedly? Were I a stranger to this land, and had the reports of the two secret Committees of the last sessions put into my hands, I would ask no other evidence of injudicious Government. What do we find there? a conspiracy of near 300,000 fighting men

men in three Provinces, in military organization, and sworn to overthrow the Constitution. It is now well known, that Connaught was as deeply engaged in the conspiracy, tho' not then so forward. Can any evidence be stronger of bad Government, than 400,000 men able to bear arms out of a population of four millions, or four millions and a half, should solemnly bind themselves to overthrow it. But, Sir, we have it from the first authority, that our Legislature has been corrupt and abominable. We have it from the British Minister, and we have it from the Castle Pamphleteer. Can any man doubt, that we ought to rescue ourselves from this degraded situation? Can any man doubt that we ought to shew the British minister, that this House, is worthy of the confidence of the Irish Nation. Can any man doubt but that we ought to enquire as to every abuse, and every grievance, and do them away. Sir, I call on the House of Commons of Ireland, to awake from its slumber, and work while it is day. I call on the House of Commons of Ireland to awake, and not wait to be aroused by the crush of the Constitution. I call on the House of Commons of Ireland to awake, and contemplate the mighty scenes that are passing around them. Do you believe the present convulsions of civilized Europe, are owing to the mere machinations of men? No, it is the hand of God visiting the bad Governments of the world. France is permitted to be a scourge to herself, and to others, because her Government was tyrannic and corrupt, and because her Nobles, her Gentry and her dignified Clergy disgraced and abused their elevated situations. What was it destroyed Holland? That base love of money, which made every man of consequence consider himself, and abolished all their former love of virtue and of freedom? What was it destroyed the different Italian states but their tyranny and their vices? What is it, that is paying the way;

way, to revolutionize Spain and Portugal, but their pernicious systems of Government. I say again to the Irish House of Commons awake, and remove every thing that is justly obnoxious, or you perish: and I call upon the Nobles, the Gentry, and the Clergy to avert their own ruin by the practice of every public, and of every private virtue.

Sir, there are but two lines of conduct for us to pursue: the one is a system of conciliation, with a strong executive power to give time for wholesome laws, and wholesome measures to operate. The other is force alone. If the former be pursued, I would answer with my life, that the termination will be happy. If the latter, I know not the consequence. Your military are made up of different descriptions: can we answer for the steadiness of all? Have we calculated, what might be the consequence of a powerful descent from France? But I will suppose the military steady, the French baffled, and the Rebels defeated; the bayonet will not alter the human mind, and you must go into a war of extermination: and if you do, is it not inevitable ruin; what would remain after the conflict, an Island inhabited by old men, women and children; an Island with its houses destroyed, and its fields desolated; an Island with the remnant of its gentry and its People involved in one common beggary; an Island, more gifted from nature, than perhaps any other spot on the habitable globe, exhibiting an awful monument of the consequences of sanguinary injustice, of national distraction, and of national folly.

Sir, before I go into the specific system, that in my opinion would tranquillize Ireland, I think it necessary to declare, that I give up for the present all idea of external Parliamentary reform Parliamentary reform has been an object dear to me from the first moment I ever thought of Politics, and in happier times would be again my object.

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But from the peculiar situation of Ireland, one fourth of her inhabitants only being Protestants, and the rest Catholics, I see its impracticability, till the Protestants almost individually feel that a prudent reform might be made consistent with their security; having thus given up external reform for the present, the internal becomes the more necessary. I have no objection to the fair patronage of the crown, in disposing of the military and naval appointments; I have no objection to the fair patronage of the crown in disposing of the dignities of the church, and of every necessary office in the state; and this is a sufficient patronage for every wholesome purpose. But, Sir, I am the avowed enemy to that extent of patronage, that enables the minister to corrupt the Legislature. I shall not say a word, Sir, of the present house of commons, for that I know would be unparliamentary; but I may declare with Mr. Pitt, and the Castle Pamphlet, that Great Britain has governed Ireland prior to the election of the present house of Commons, by corrupting our Parliament: In order therefore, to take away at least, a part of the means of corrupting it in future, one of the resolutions, I shall presently propose to you will be, that it is the opinion of this house that all sinecure places should be abolished, compensation being made to their present possessors.

Sir, I have said that the abolition of sinecure places, would in part take away the means of corruption, but that alone will not be sufficient; from the moment Ireland obtained her independence in 1782, the English ministry resolved, and it is now openly and barefacedly acknowledged, to govern Ireland as they pleased through the medium of corruption; in pursuance of this plan, several new places have been created since that period; it might perhaps be the best way to abolish them also, but as that might lead to an argument as to their utility, I shall only submit a resolution to the house, that it is the opinion of

of this house, that no man should in future sit in it, who holds any office created since the year 1782.

I shall now call the attention of the house to what remains to be given to the Catholics; their Peers are at present precluded from sitting in Parliament, because their consciences will not permit them to take the oath prescribed by law; for the same reason none can become members of this house: and there are certain offices in the state, from which they are precluded by act of Parliament. It will I am sure be admitted that nothing but the most absolute necessity can warrant any man to inflict restriction or penalty on another on account of religion; now is there any man in this house who, on serious reflection, will get up and say, there could be danger to the Protestants, or to the state, whilst parliament remains constituted as it is, by giving what is now withheld from the Catholics: let us suppose these restrictions done away; what is to follow,—eight or ten Catholic Peers would take their places in the house of Lords, which now consists of about 180, including the Bishops; how are the number of Catholic Peers to be increased? only by new creations made by a Protestant King: and is there any man who will suppose that a Protestant King will ever make such a creation of Catholic Peers, as will give them a preponderancy in the upper house of Parliament? In regard to this house, what is the fact; who sends the county members? the landlords of Ireland? who are the landlords of Ireland? Protestants, with a few exceptions. In whose hands are the boroughs? entirely in the hands of Protestants, two or three cities, and a few towns, may perhaps be nearly divided, or perhaps the ballance of property may be in favour of the Catholics; but can any rational man have a serious alarm of any preponderance of Catholics in the Irish house of Commons, in the way members are now returned? I am persuaded, there is no ra-

tional man has such an idea: some Catholics of property would no doubt, find their way here; and I for one, shall be most heartily glad to see them. Let us next enquire if any mischief could arise from their being allowed to fill the places from which they are at present precluded; who appoints to these places? the king. Will any man seriously say, he is afraid of the safety of the state if we should allow Catholics to occupy the higher offices? Will any man suppose that a Protestant King will ever appoint a Catholic to one of them, unless he be distinguished for his knowledge, his abilities, and his virtues? and if he be so distinguished, on what principle should he be prevented? Sir, I should be glad to see the King raising men of such a description, no matter of what sect, to the highest offices; I should be glad to see the King raising Catholics of integrity and sufficient property to the Peerage: I wish for every thing that will blend the inhabitants of Ireland into one people: whilst enmity remains between the Protestants and Catholics, Ireland can never be a great, a happy, or a prosperous nation. And therefore, Sir, the third resolution I shall submit to the house will be this; that it is the opinion of this house, that full Catholic Emancipation may be safely given, provided the present mode of returning members to the house of Commons shall continue, till time shall evince to every thinking Protestant, that they will have nothing to fear from a prudent reform in Parliament.

Sir, the next thing I shall call the attention of the house to, is tithes; a subject on which men's minds are more agreed than perhaps on any other: almost every man in the nation is against the payment of tithes unless it be to the established clergy, the tithe Proctors, and some of the landed gentlemen, who pay next to nothing, because the clergy find it necessary to have their aid to enable them to collect from their peasantry: from the earliest period of recollecti

recollection, tithes have been the subject of general discontent; they chiefly gave birth to the white boys of the south, and the hearts of oak, and hearts of steel of the north: ask the quaker what he thinks of tithes? he tells you, he cannot pay them, because he thinks it contrary to christianity, and many of them have evinced their sincerity, by even going to jail; ask those who are of the established religion of the country, what they think of them; and you will be answered almost to a man, that they feel it unjust, that they should expend all that is done in improvement, and that he who expends nothing is entitled to a tenth of the benefit: ask of the Catholics and the different dissenters, they will give you the same reason of those of the establishment, but with this strong additional one, that it is unjust that they should be compelled to pay a clergyman they never hear, whom they do not acknowledge, and from whom they can receive no possible benefit. Sir, I happen to be of the established religion, but if I were not, I say I would feel the payment of two clergy a grievance. There are certain things that every man, in certain situations must feel to be grievances, and that Government is highly culpable, and highly unwise, that does not do them away. Sir, I am not adverse to a fair and liberal payment of the Clergy, but I want it by a mode that will make the teacher, and those who are able to be taught, in friendship with one another. If the Devil had been consulted how the Clergy should be rendered useless, I think it was by paying them with tithes. But if tithes were even the best mode that could have been adopted, the universal dislike of them should induce a wise Legislature to alter them. A wise Legislature will for ever consult the temper, and wishes of the People it has to govern, and as far as it is possible, will gratify those wishes. But it will be asked what is to be substituted? It is not necessary to go into

detail, as that will belong to the House in Committee; but if we agree to the principle, there can be no doubt, that means can be found, to carry the resolution into effect. I will just suppose for a moment, that tithes should be changed into a rent, to which the lands should be for ever liable, subject to rise and fall at the end of 21 years, or some other period to be fixed on, according to the then average price of grain. This I am told is the way certain leases are made by some of the English colleges, and might be perhaps usefully adopted here. But, Sir I again say that will be the business of the committee, and I shall therefore only add at present, that the 4th resolution I wish the House to come to is.—That it is the opinion of this House that tithes should be abolished, and some other mode of paying the established clergy be substituted in their stead.

Sir, the clergy who are not paid by tithe have peculiar influence on their congregations; I mean those of the Dissenters and Catholics, and it would well become the wisdom of Government to make such a liberal provision for them, as would give them a deep interest in the prosperity of the state. The consequence would be that in every corner of the Kingdom, the Legislature would have able men, inculcating the necessity of subordination and obedience to the laws. It must strike every gentleman who hears me, that the clergy from their situation and universality over the country, can be either the great means of fomenting or putting down Rebellion. I may be asked here, but how is the expence to be borne? I answer, that the expence would in a few months be found oeconomy: for their influence, accompanied with the effects of the other resolutions, would soon render 100,000 men of our present military establishment unnecessary. The last resolution I shall therefore propose is.—That it is the opinion of this House that a liberal provision should be made

made for the secular Catholic clergy of this Kingdom; and also for the ministers of the different dissenting congregations now existing in Ireland.

Sir, I should hope the Irish minister and those around him, would support every one of these resolutions; but at all events I cannot suppose they will oppose the two last, because it has been held out both by Mr. Pitt and the castle pamphleteer, that an abolition of tithes, and a provision for the dissenting and Catholic clergy, should accompany an Union. Will the Irish minister say to the People of Ireland, there are good measures with an Union, but totally inadmissible if they retain their independence? Will the Irish minister openly avow, these good things shall not be given you unless you accept a Legislative Union? And if he will not, I shall be glad to hear, what he has to offer against the principle of all or any of these regulations.

Sir, I have now fully given to this House the system that I would adopt, to restore order to this distracted nation; let me now point out, what I am satisfied would be the consequence. It may perhaps, be said with truth, as to three provinces of Ireland, that the great majority of the People know nothing of Parliamentary reform, and that they never annexed to it any specific advantage; but it is not so: as to the Province of Ulster, which is the great stamina of this land, the great mass of the People of that Province are perhaps as sagacious, and as well informed a Peasantry and Yeomanry as any in the King's dominions. They did annex to Parliamentary reform the abolition of useless places, the prevention of corruption, and the improper interference of Great Britain; they did annex to Parliamentary reform, the consequences of an honest, uncorrupt house of Commons. From the situation of the times, I am however persuaded, they would be contented
with

with an internal reform of Parliament, followed up by those wholesome laws and regulations, which I have just now proposed. I will venture to say the same of the middling orders in the other three provinces: they will see it is the best that can be done, under the present existing order of things: the clergy of the establishment will of course be the friends of Government, and the other orders of Clergy would I am persuaded be perfectly satisfied. As to the very lowest class of people, they would feel happy in being relieved from Tithe and the payment of two Clergy, the only evils they peculiarly feel. Thus, Sir, I would sweep the whole mass of the People into the bosom of the State; and thus would we be enabled to bid defiance to every foreign and domestic foe. I do not say there would not still remain men whose turbulent spirits, and whose ambitious views would endeavour to overthrow the Constitution; but where would be their armies—where would be their supporters? if they went to the lower orders of the three Provinces of Leinster, Munster, and Connaught, and talked to them of grievances, what would be their answer? It would be, we no longer pay tithe—we no longer pay two Clergy, and we are sick of the horrors of civil war. — If they go to Ulster, they would receive for answer, we pay no Tithe, we pay but one Clergyman, and we have got by an internal reform in Parliament, wise laws and wholesome regulations: we therefore love, and we will support the Government. Such also would be the opinions of all the middle orders of men throughout the kingdom; what would be the answer of the Catholic and dissenting Clergy to such agitators? they would say, we are comfortably provided for, and we know there is no change you can bring about, that would better the clerical order; we have seen what has happened to the Clergy by revolutions in other countries, and we will op-
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pose every attempt to overthrow the Constitution of Ireland. Sir, let us pass these resolutions, and follow them up by necessary laws, and every man inclined to rebellion must abandon his purpose or abandon this land.

Let us now consider how these resolutions would operate, as to enabling us effectually to resist a legislative Union. The Irish House of Commons has voted it will have no possible Union: the English Minister in the face of that declaration passes every specific resolution relative to the Union in the British House of Commons, which he follows by a conference with the Lords, who are now considering the same resolutions; and it is declared, that all this is to end in an address to the King to lay them before the Irish Parliament; what does the Irish Minister say, that it is a measure that will never be lost sight of: can any man doubt but with the means in the power of the minister, a majority of one may be obtained in this house; can any man doubt after such a conduct, and such declarations, that they will carry the measure if they can: can any man doubt, if the people are supine, that with the laws now in force, and the military power in the country, that a Legislative Union may be carried; how then are we to stem it? by making the people love and respect this House: by making the people so attached to their own Legislature, that the British minister must feel, that tho' he could carry and enforce Legislative Union for a moment, it would ultimately end in separation: I therefore call on every man to whom a Legislative Union is odious, to support the resolutions I shall propose to you.

Sir, all are agreed that Ireland is in the most critical situation; let then every man feel, that he at least has done his duty; let every man pause, before he tells the people, that their Legislature if it is to continue, must continue under

der a system of corruption; let every man pause before he tells the Catholics, they have nothing to hope from an Irish house of Commons; let every man pause before he tells the people, he will not abolish tithes, tho' England is ready to do so, if a Legislative Union be accepted; let every man pause before he says to the Catholic and dissenting clergy, I will make no provision for you, tho' England will do so, if you adopt a Legislative Union.

Sir, I have not been anxious to obtrude myself on the house, but have waited from day to day, in the hope that some person of more consequence would have offered a system of conciliation; I would have been particularly happy, if such a system had come from the noble Lord on the Treasury bench, because it would then have been peculiarly healing. But finding no man on any side of the House ready to do, what appears to me indispensable to the national safety, I should have felt myself a guilty man, had I remained silent. I have now unburthened my mind, whatever may be the consequence. If these resolutions be rejected, I shall sincerely wish that those measures which may be thought wiser, may answer their purpose. If Irish prosperity and happiness be produced by them, it will be to me, a subject of joy: If on the other hand they create new misfortunes, whilst I lament them, I shall have the consolation, of having done all in the power of an humble individual to avert them. As to myself, I have secured that I shall sleep in peace if I am permitted to live, and if death should be my portion, I trust I shall meet it with fortitude and serenity.



